

Book Review

Urry, John. 2011. *Climate Change & Society*. Polity Press, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 217 pages.

Giddens, Anthony. 2011. *The Politics of Climate Change*. Polity Press, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 269 pages.

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The academic and media discourses on climate change have been dominated by the physical or natural sciences and economics. Occasionally the effects (actual and potential) of climate change on the poorer regions of the world or on poor communities within these regions have been highlighted, but there has been a distinct lack of analysis of the societal processes that have led to their vulnerability in the first place. These two books attempt to persuade us that the social sciences generally, not only economics, have much to contribute to our understanding of the causes of climate change, the implications of climate change for the future of society, and the way forward to a low carbon economy and society.

The domination of economics over the other social sciences (“economics imperialism”) in the climate change discourse was, Urry informs us, clearly reflected in the Stern Review of 2006, which attracted wide media attention and was subsequently published as *The Economics of Climate Change*. Sir Nicholas Stern did what economists do and put a monetary value on the predicted effects of climate change (5% of global GDP per year, forever, possibly rising to 20%) unless serious efforts to stabilise greenhouse gases in the atmosphere were made; predictably

economic measures were a large part of the solution. Stern's report wasn't unanimously lauded, even some economists expressed doubts about his methodology and conclusions, but it no doubt helped to reinforce the notion that economics is the indispensable social science. Urry, while acknowledging the importance of economics, views economic analyses of climate change as having three major limitations: (i) they ignore the social and political consequences of economic decision-making; (ii) they treat people as rational consumers maximising individual utility but fail to take into account the "very many social processes [that] are central to high carbon lives and also to potential low carbon lives" (p.3); (iii) most economists overestimate the power of the market and underestimate the significance of natural resources, including energy resources, for economic and social life, with shortages seen as a temporary phenomenon that the market can quickly put right. Crucially, Urry believes that if economics remains the dominant perspective when addressing climate change, policy-makers are unlikely to produce the social and physical conditions necessary for a low carbon society. It is essential, he believes, that the social sciences provide an analysis of how to move to a low carbon society involving a wide-ranging transformation of the patterns of social life and the nullification of the special interests of what he refers to as "the carbon military-industrial complex." (p.157), which Giddens also sees as being necessary. Neither author appears to think success here will require establishing an alternative to capitalism. Urry believes that the transformation is more likely under conditions of greater social equity and stronger democracy involving decentralization within a country and probably some deglobalization in the economic sphere. Giddens would undoubtedly agree on the first two positions but perhaps not the third. Both would certainly support a greater cosmopolitanism and the exposing and shaming of intransigent corporations who are blocking reforms.

Anthony Giddens is the UK's leading public sociologist, a former adviser of the government of Tony Blair and a former director of the London School of Economics. His book has a narrower focus than

Urry's and is, he tells us in the introduction, an extended enquiry into why governments, politicians, business leaders, and most other people, generally act as though they can ignore the economic and social havoc that is likely to arise from global warming. The short answer to this is what he somewhat narcissistically refers to as "Giddens paradox", [the idea has been around for decades] which states that the effects of global warming for most people are still not concrete enough for them to feel compelled to do something about it. Yet it is essential that it is tackled before we bear its full brunt. The longer answer is developed in the remainder of the book in which he gives his analysis of the political failure to bring global warming centre stage and his suggestions for rectifying this.

Both authors agree with the robustness of the scientific evidence for global warming but acknowledge that there is some, albeit slim, risk that the consequences might not be as catastrophic as scientists believe. Nevertheless they believe we cannot postpone the transition towards a low carbon future and each puts forward interesting, not necessarily original, ideas about how we get there and the obstacles to be overcome. Urry though ultimately seems somewhat sceptical about the shift to a low carbon economy occurring unless the paradox that Giddens refers to somehow ceases to exist as a result of a sustained and severe global recession unambiguously caused by oil and gas shortages and incontrovertible evidence of climate change in the developed countries. Qualifying as such would be high record temperatures, deaths resulting from droughts and flooding, and severe food shortages. At one point he claims that perhaps the most important roles for sociologists will be in contributing to the field of disaster studies and the "sociology of vulnerability and resilience". (p. 166) Giddens seems to hold out more hope of success but this is predicated to a large extent on climate change policy being able to survive shifts of government. Most of the efforts to tackle global warming have, he reminds us, been carried out by left of centre governments rather than their opposite and indeed a change to a right of centre government has usually led to an unravelling of the

previous government's policies designed to reduce GHG emissions. Giddens believes the state has the main role in tackling climate change but this will require broad popular support and great care not to infringe human rights and a commitment to deepening democracy. It's main tasks will be to: encourage long-term thinking; managing climate change risks in the context of other risks faced by most societies; promote economic and political convergence as the foundation of responsible climate change and energy policies; intervene in markets; stand up to business interests that try to thwart climate change initiatives; keep it near the top of the political agenda; ensure that economic and fiscal policies support the transition to a low carbon future; work out a strategy for dealing with the effects of those climate changes that are by now inevitable; integrate measures to tackle climate change at all levels of the political system, from local to international. To achieve these tasks, he says, will require governments to radically overhaul themselves and their relations with markets and civil society. Drawing on the work of a variety of political commentators Giddens, uncontroversially, spells out what is required on the ground. An essential ingredient of success he believes will be a cross party "concordat" on GHG targets and how to reach them. And he wants such a concordat to be independently monitored by a body with the powers to prosecute the government if it fails to adhere to its commitments.

The blurring of the boundaries of the social sciences is probably inevitable when dealing with real world problems and neither author, despite being an eminent sociologist, produces an exclusively sociological account of the causes and consequences of climate change, and economics, perhaps rightly, casts a long shadow in both books. Both authors provide rational and coherent accounts of the social, economic and political dimensions of climate change when analysing its causes, its possible consequences and way to a low carbon future. Each book lucidly brings together a wide range of social scientific thinking on climate change but ultimately contributes little that is original. I would recommend the books for undergraduate courses in the environment, politics, sociology and the like.